

Bell Deals With Ray Ruled Out

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WASHINGTON — Atty. Gen. Griffin Bell has no plans for negotiations or deals with James Earl Ray, who is serving a 99-year sentence in Tennessee's Brushy Mountain prison for the 1968 murder in Memphis of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

A Justice Department spokesman Friday countered reports suggesting Bell is considering trying to work out a deal with Ray to get him to tell how he got money and passports to finance his travels before and after the King killing.

"The attorney general said he'd like to

interview Ray, or have some trusted aide do it, to try to find out how he got his money and passports," the spokesman said. "He didn't say he was going to attempt it."

Instead, the spokesman added, Bell said the department was putting the King case "in abeyance" pending the outcome of a House move to investigate the assassination of the civil rights leader.

The House inquiry, stalled by bickering and feuding, appeared to be back on track Friday after House Democratic leader Jim Wright of Texas announced he had approved a compromise offered by some

of the warring members of the Select Committee on Assassinations.

Wright said the committee's swollen staff would be reduced and that controversial Richard A. Sprague will remain as chief counsel but that Sprague's duties as staff counsel will be assigned to someone else. In turn, Chairman Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Texas) has agreed not to press in firing Sprague and replacing him with Brown.

Gonzalez, who is seriously ill with influenza in San Antonio, has agreed to the arrangement and will continue as chairman, Wright said.

A majority of the committee's 12 members worked out the deal and took it to Wright Wednesday. Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.) also reportedly was consulted.

If the deal holds, the committee can turn to the task of trying to persuade the House to continue its life beyond the present March 31 cutoff date. With many House members disturbed by the recent quarreling, an extension could well be in jeopardy.

Bell's comments about wanting to interview Ray were made in response to questions at a Thursday morning breakfast with about 35 or 40 reporters arranged by Geoffrey Sperling Jr., chief of the Christian Science Monitor's Washington staff. Sperling handled arrangements. Bell was a guest. The breakfast was at a Washington hotel.

Bell was asked about a 201-page report by a Justice Department task force that reviewed a case. The report was released last week. It concluded Ray killed King and acted alone.

The report criticized investigators of the King slaying for not being more diligent in trying to find out how Ray got money for his travels. "Accordingly, the

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Lack Of Authority, Attorney Keeping Ray Out of Reach

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sources of Ray's funds still remain a mystery today," the report said.

The report speculated Ray may have been assisted by family members, documenting contacts he had with two brothers, and also noted the FBI believed Ray got money from a series of robberies.

The Justice spokesman said it was in commenting upon this aspect of the case that Bell told the group he'd like to interview Ray.

The spokesman said, however, that Bell would have no more authority than the Justice Department task force, which had unsuccessfully to talk to Ray during its nine month study.

Ray's current attorney steadfastly has refused to any interview of his client. Last month Ray wrote a long, rambling, abusive letter to the House committee asking to appear and testify. But his attorney dismissed the latter as capricious

and reasserted his objections.

The FBI visited Ray twice after his conviction, on March 13, 1969, and again the following day. Agents reported Ray provided no pertinent information.

The Justice Department spokesman said that because Ray is a prisoner of the State of Tennessee, the U.S. attorney general would require the permission of state authorities to see Ray.

If Bell wants to talk with Ray, Tennessee's chief legal officer doesn't plan to offer any opposition.

State Atty. Gen. Brooks McLemore, Tennessee's chief legal officer, said he hasn't "got anything to say" about whether Bell or anyone else could interview Ray, who is serving 99 years.

"He's in the custody of the corrections department," McLemore said of Ray. He added that an interview could take place if Ray were willing and the corrections department had no objection.



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